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AUTHOR Holmes, Julie A.
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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the outcomes of an intrinsic case study of the implementation of inclusion in a North Louisiana parish and the placement of special needs students within this parish. The case study was undertaken in an attempt to better understand the meaning and effect of the experience of teaching in an inclusive setting and of the placement decisions made for special needs students. Data were collected by means of reflective journals, review of documents, and interviews with teachers and administrators in the five elementary schools in the parish who participated in inclusion classrooms during the 1998/1999 school year. Four of the schools piloted inclusive classes at selected grade levels. One of the schools contained all sixth grade students and all the special education students were placed throughout the school. Teachers faced problems with classroom disruptions, discipline, lack of resources, and lack of knowledge. They used different strategies to assist students with disabilities including modified assignments, peer tutoring, individualized instruction from the special education resource teacher, and use of manipulatives. With the proper modifications, the inclusion students progressed well in most cases at each of the five schools. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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The Least Restrictive Environment: Is Inclusion Best for All Special Needs Students?

Julie A. Holmes, M.S.

Louisiana Tech University/Lincoln Parish Schools

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
Of the Mid-South Educational Research Association

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Inclusion Defined

To define the term inclusion is a difficult task. Many interpretations exist and the lack of a consistent definition is one of the difficulties incurred when writing on the topic of inclusion (Havey, 1998). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 gave special needs students the right to a free and appropriate education, which meant placement in the least restrictive environment where the student could benefit most in a setting most like the regular classroom (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). Vast differences in the interpretation of this general definition can be found in the literature. Staub and Peck (1994/1995) define inclusion as "the full time placement of children with mild, moderate, or severe disabilities in regular classrooms"(p. 36) and this option should be considered for all special needs students, regardless of the severity of their disabilities. The definition used by the National Association of School Psychologists (as cited in Havey, 1998) builds upon this general statement. It reads:

> Inclusive programs are those in which students, regardless of the severity of their disability, receive appropriate specialized instruction and related services within an age-appropriate general education classroom in the school they would attend if they did not have a disability.

The debate over a clear-cut definition of inclusion is not the only problem. Several factions have formed within education circles, thus making an agreed upon interpretation of the term even more difficult. Fuchs and Fuchs (1994/1995) identified three groups of inclusionists. There are full inclusionists who opt for a complete dissolution of special education. This would mean everything with the "special education" label would be obsolete. This group feels that special education has become a means to seclude the "unteachables". Full inclusion is seen by this group as a way to transform the regular classroom into a more humane and resourceful system. There is also a group of full inclusionists that say the regular classroom should be the only place where special educators should provide services for special needs (and non-special needs) students. This means that there would still be special education services, but only within the general education setting, therefore no pullout programs or self-contained special education settings. Then there is the group that sees inclusion as the answer to reduce the costs

of special education. In the rush to implement inclusion for this reason, Shanker (1994/1995) has pointed out that inclusion has resulted in a crushing financial blow to the schools because funding was never appropriated at levels promised by Congress, leaving the burden of cost to states and local school boards.

Despite the lack of a distinct definition of inclusion and the many different interpretations of how to reconstruct special education programs by using inclusion, the fact is that inclusion must be an option because it is the law.

What Exactly is the Least Restrictive Environment?

IDEA provided for an appropriate education for disabled students, but the law and the regulations designed to put it into effect did not outline how school districts were to determine the least restrictive environment (Yell, 1995). Lack of guidelines resulted in uncertainty on how to put the law into practice and caused conflict between parents, regular and special education teachers, advocacy groups, and administrators over the meaning of the least restrictive environment mandate.

Several noteworthy court cases have helped to give focus to the definition of the least restrictive environment mandate (Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education, 1989: Greer v. Rome City School District, 1991: Oberti v. Board of Education of Clementon School District, 1993: Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel H., 1994, as cited in Yell, 1995). From these cases, the following are key considerations to educators in deciding upon the least restrictive environment:

1. The decision for placement should be based on the individual needs of the disabled child (Yell, 1995; Smith & Dowdy, 1998; Havey, 1998). This determination should be the decision of a team comprised of (a) the child, (b) parents, (c) regular education and special education teachers, (d) other teachers who may provide services for the child (such as speech therapists), and (e) school administrators. The placement chosen should be determined only after the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) has been written by the team described earlier. Decisions about educational placement should be made on a case-by-case basis and never as a blanket

decision for all students (Sewall, Kohler, Smith, & Chapman, 1994). To determine that one placement strategy is best for all is to imply that all students can function and achieve in the same manner, which educators know is not the case. Smith and Dowdy described using inclusion for "blanket decisions" in this way:

> Placing all children with disabilities in general classroom settings, without regard to individual needs, because it reflects best practice, does not support the least restrictive environment concept nor the goal of providing appropriate educational programs for all children (p. 317).

2. Every effort needs to be made to keep a student with a disability in an integrated setting (Yell, 1995). This may mean making a serious attempt to provide supplemental aides and services, but yet not to the extent of being extremely costly, modifying the curriculum beyond recognition, or taking up inordinate amounts of the teacher's time in dealing with the student with a disability (Havey, 1998).

3. Special education students must have a complete spectrum of alternative placements available to the extent needed by the school district (Yell, 1995; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). This principle helps to comply with making decisions with the best interest of each individual special needs student by the IEP team. One method or program rarely works well for all. With a continuum of placements available, each individual will have a better chance of succeeding within an environment that is best suited for him/her.

4. The needs of the student's peers should be regarded when making decisions on the least restrictive environment for the special education child (Yell, 1995; Havey, 1998). Student peers can gain many benefits from having special needs students in the regular setting. Staub and Peck (1994/1995) cited such potential benefits as (a) increased comfort and awareness of human differences, (b) positive growth in social attitudes toward disabled students, (c) improved self-concept, and (d) development of personal principles. However, if the special needs child is exhibiting behaviors that interfere with the other students' rights, such as adequate time for help from the teacher or having a classroom climate that is conducive to learning, and every attempt

has been made to correct the problem, Staub and Peck state that another placement option needs to be considered.

5. When a more restrictive setting is chosen for a special needs student, the individual must be integrated into regular settings to the greatest extent that is appropriate for the child (Yell, 1995). The requirements of the law can be met for those students who need placement in a more restrictive setting by incorporating them into regular classes of non-academic subjects, lunch, recess, or any combination of these.

6. The burden of proof in defending placement decisions will be borne by the schools (Yell, 1995). Whatever placement decisions are made for special needs students, whether they are for an inclusion setting or those of a more restrictive nature, the school must be able to provide evidence of why this decision was made. This was often the reason that the schools lost in the afore mentioned court cases. The evidence was not there, or a serious effort could not be proven that the schools had exhausted every option available to them in order to make the current placement work (Yell, 1995: Havey, 1998).

Purpose and Design of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of an intrinsic case study of the implementation of inclusion in a North Louisiana parish and the placement of special needs students within this parish. The author (case) is a practicing elementary school teacher with ten years of teaching experience and has participated in a full inclusion setting at her school. This intrinsic, reflexive case study was undertaken in an attempt to better understand the meaning and effect of the experience of teaching in an inclusion setting and of the placement decisions made for special needs students. The study was conducted because of the intrinsic interest in the meaning of the inclusion experience (Stake, 1994).

Data were collected by means of reflective journals, review of documents, and interviews with other teachers and administrators in the parish who participated in inclusion classrooms. A peer debriefer was utilized to help ensure credibility, confirmability, and dependability of the data collected in this qualitative research design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A reflective view of the data

was utilized to determine the major themes regarding inclusion and placement options that emerged from the data.

The Inclusion Initiative

During the 1998/1999 school year, inclusion classes were implemented in five elementary schools in a North Louisiana parish to provide another option for the least restrictive environment for special education students. In the past, these schools had self-contained special education classes and integrated these students into regular education settings whenever possible. For example, an individual student would go to regular classrooms for instruction in areas that were not identified as his/her weakness for part of the school day. Other times the entire self-contained class would be paired with a regular education class for such activities as art or music.

With the implementation of inclusion classes, each school addressed the situation in different ways. Four of the elementary schools piloted inclusion classes at selected grade levels. Each of the grade levels selected had one class chosen as the inclusion class. This was the case, simply because there were not enough special education teachers to provide services to more than one class per grade level (Sharon Thomas, acting as Special Education Administrator, personal communication, October, 1999). One of the elementary schools in this parish contained all sixth grade students and all the special education students were placed throughout the school.

In the "rush", placement decisions for the students were hurriedly completed. According to Sharon Thomas, then acting as Special Education Administrator in the parish (personal communication, October 1999), students were selected for the program by a combination of different strategies in these elementary schools. Principals and teachers met and discussed those students receiving special education services and determined those students who appeared to be good candidates for the inclusion setting. The parents of special education students were approached and consulted as to whether they felt their child would benefit from being in an inclusion class. Some parents were given the option of having their child in an inclusion class on a trial basis to see if this type of environment would work well for their child.

In my classroom, I had a class of 15 students, with six special education students (all boys; four black and two white). The full class had seven girls and eight boys with an ethnic distribution of 13 black students and two white students. The general ability level of the regular education students was very low. This class' national percentile rank on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills was 12% for the total reading battery and 34% for the total language battery. The special education resource teacher assigned to my class met with individuals and small groups of students for two and one half-hours each morning. The rest of the school day I was alone to instruct the entire group. This seemed to be a typical setting within the district according to other teachers and administrators with whom I spoke.

As the school year progressed those teachers in the district who were teaching inclusion classes were sent to workshops for additional training. We discussed with each other as we traveled to the workshops how we felt the inclusion setting was working for us and for our students. We agreed that inclusion was clearly not the best choice for several of our special education students. One teacher complained of how one of her inclusion students constantly disrupted her class by disturbing other students. He would call out loudly in class or bother other students by taking their pencils or books away from them. I had a similar problem. "Matt" would constantly demand my attention and disturb others by kicking or throwing things. The only way to get him settled was to have him sit right next to the resource teacher to work on assignments. When she wasn't there, however, the problems escalated again.

The question was what to do about inclusion students such at "Matt", who were causing problems for the other students. Alternative behavioral management strategies were employed. At one workshop, conducted by Linda Tilton (1997), behavior management strategies were discussed, such as (a) ignoring negative behaviors, (b) giving positive comments, (c) rewards, (d) getting out frustrations by anger writing or drawing, and (e) use of relaxation tapes. Many of the teachers found that having a wealth of behavior management options such as these helped because eventually one strategy could usually be found that worked. Throughout the year the

inclusion teachers continued to share management strategies that could possibly help each other in their classrooms.

In my particular case, when the special education resource teacher left for the day, an aide was sent to sit with "Matt". This worked for awhile, but when the aide could not be there because of other students who needed her as well, the problems arose again. Finally the time came for "Matt's" annual Individualized Education Plan (IEP) review. The team, consisting of an administrator, the special education resource teacher, the parent, the child, and myself met to discuss "Matt's" progress. We concluded "Matt" needed a more restrictive environment. He would remain in my room while the special education resource teacher was present and he would go to a self-contained class for the rest of the school day. In other cases, Sharon Thomas (personal communication, October, 1999) mentioned that other strategies employed by other teachers were to send the student with his/her regular classroom work back to the special education resource teacher in some instances or to call the parents to come and observe and discuss the situation at hand.

On the other hand, positive comments were made by most of the teachers about the inclusion setting being an excellent choice for many of the special education students. Many strategies were being used by these teachers to assist the special education students in the regular setting, such as (a) modified assignments, (b) peer tutoring, (c) individualized instruction from the special education resource teacher, and (d) use of manipulatives or having math word problems read to the students. With the proper modifications, the inclusion students seemed to be progressing well in most cases at each of the five schools.

The real problem in these cases was lack of knowledge. Both teachers and administrators were operating under the "stay-put" provision of IDEA, meaning we felt we could not move these troublesome students to another setting. This is no longer the case. Revisions in 1997 have changed IDEA, allowing for a change in placement, especially if the inclusion student is causing the peers in his/her class to compromise their educational rights (Department of Education, 1999). Many regular education inclusion teachers at these six schools did not know the laws

involved when working with these students and the rights of the others in the class as well. I was virtually unaware of many of these laws and procedures until I researched the literature for this paper.

By the year's end much progress had been made. The regular education students in these settings gained by playing the role of helper and tutor to these special needs students, which was a situation they had rarely experienced in the past. In several of the inclusion classes, regular education students were informally paired with the inclusion students to review vocabulary words or to complete assignments. Other classes used small groups of three students to accomplish a task together, such as Daily Oral Language sentences in which the students were to correct errors in sentences written on the board, such as missing capital letters and punctuation marks. In my class, I dispersed the inclusion students with the regular education students to do Daily Oral Language sentences and review phonics cards and spelling words from the Johnny Can Spell program. By May, the groups were helping each other and giving praise to each other for group successes. The inclusion setting for a majority of the special education students seemed to work. Their academic gains were as good or better than in the past when these students were in self-contained classes. One teacher even commented that she felt the inclusion students exceeded her expectations and even did better than some of her regular education students.

The Future of Inclusion

In reflection of the past school year, the new special education administrator in this parish has decided to put inclusion "on hold" for awhile. In direct communication with her, the author learned that for the 1999/2000 school year, inclusion would not be expanded beyond what had already been in place the previous year. She has also formed a committee of teachers from throughout the parish to develop a parish-wide policy concerning the roles and responsibilities of the regular education teacher in the inclusion classroom, discipline procedures, and grading policies. At my school (and others in the parish) we have added the dimension of departmentalization for third through fifth grades. The inclusion students are dispersed through

out all the regular education classes in all subjects at these grade levels and get the opportunity to learn with many students of many abilities. Most of these students still go to resource classes for part of the day to address their exceptionalities according to their IEP's.

It appears, according to the literature reviewed for this paper, that some things in the implementation of inclusion were handled properly by this parish. These include providing inclusion to expand the spectrum of placement choices available in these schools and integrating those students in more restrictive environments into the regular setting whenever possible. Many of the recommendations of Maloney (1994/1995) were things that were done by the teachers in this parish: (a) collaborative learning, (b) cooperative teaching, (c) peer tutoring, and (d) innovative scheduling and planning. Departmentalization of the upper grades is an example that has helped with the scheduling of the inclusion students this year. Each teacher at each grade level is teaching his/her particular subject area during four different times during the day. With four teachers at each grade level that is departmentalized teaching the various subjects four times throughout the day, the inclusion students can be placed in the regular education classes they can participate in far more easily than before.

Other areas, however, will need to be addressed in order for inclusion to be successful in the future. Serious consideration needs to be given to the student's peers in the inclusion class. These students have just as much of a right to an education as the inclusion students, with just as much attention from the teacher and free of disruptions. The teachers and administrators interviewed for this paper thought that flexibility was the most desirable trait necessary for inclusion to be successful. There would need to be flexibility in areas of funding, parental requests, and alternative arrangements for disruptive students (Maloney, 1994/1995). Many of these issues are being discussed in the committee mentioned earlier and recommendations are to be made to the school board.

As Brandt (1994/1995) states, "It (inclusion) works under the right conditions, but conditions are often far from right in many schools" (p.3). Brandt also mentions that we, as educators, are torn between our values and aspirations as teachers and the pressing realities of

our schools. Parents and educators will need to listen to one another and be accepting of trying new arrangements. All who are concerned for the child's education seek the right provisions for the child and sometimes mistakes will be made. However, if patience can be found by all those involved with finding what is truly best for the special education child and taking into consideration the regular education peers in these inclusion classes, fewer mistakes will be made and more beneficial solutions will be found.

At certain times, various teachers interviewed wanted to scrap the whole project of inclusion. At the beginning of the program, this seemed to be prevalent. Many of us complained of lack of training and the lack of any definition of the goals of this project, other than to comply with the law. Others felt intimidated by having another teacher in the room with them (referring to the special education teacher) and felt as though they were being observed all the time. The time involved in making modifications was immense. The discipline problems alone that were mentioned earlier could be enough to want to give up. But this would have been a mistake. The problem lies with wanting a program to be best for all involved. Inclusion is not the best for all special education students. But it can be a proper choice for many special education students with careful consideration, flexibility, and patience from teachers, parents, and administrators.

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